

# HG

HOUSE & GARDEN

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REPORT FROM MIAMI

## DESIGN ANALYSIS

**Creating Beautiful  
Rooms with  
a Simple Palette**

Bedrooms  
You Want  
to Live In







Lupines  
in the  
badlands.



Prickly pear  
cactus on  
a plateau.

**T**he pilot banks the twin-engine plane and cuts back on the throttle.

The little nine-seater bounces and shimmies on the eddy currents of a stiff east wind, descending over the white caps past the streaming hair of the kelp beds toward a wall of striated rock. For a moment it seems that he intends to land the way a fly lands on a windowpane, but in the distance I can begin to make out a notch in the headlands. On the right arm of the V, there is something long, thin, and black.

This, he laconically informs us, is the landing strip.

A few minutes later we have bumped to a stop on the north shore of Santa Cruz Island. We are only twenty-three miles off the coast of California near Santa Barbara, but when the pilot cuts the engines, the loudest sounds are the wind in the grass and feet on dirt and stones. We might as well be on some small Greek island in the days before the fall of Troy.

Santa Cruz Island is a kingdom to itself, a little continent assembled of floating fragments. The V marks the fault between the island's disparate halves: one of volcanic rock that probably floated down from around Mendocino and the other of a reddish schist from somewhere near La Jolla. Coming together in the Santa Barbara Channel millions of years ago, geologists surmise, the two halves became sutured together. On the rough grass-covered slopes, dotted with volcanic

## Odyssey to California's Past

*Natural and human history survive on Santa Cruz Island*

BY WILLIAM BRYANT LOGAN

outcroppings, there developed a unique ecological province. The island jay, larger and bluer than his mainland fellows, is found nowhere else, and the native species of ironwood, a primitive low tree with lobed leaves and bark almost like a wolf's fur, only here and on two neighboring islands.

For more than a century, two families, first the Caires and then the Stantons, built their own private kingdoms in Santa Cruz's central valley. The Caires turned the island to vineyards and sheep.

The Stantons, calling it the ranch

in the sea, made it into California's last baronial cattle spread. Until 1987 nine tenths of the island belonged to Carey Stanton, while descendants of the Caires kept control of the remaining one tenth.

Largest of the eight Channel Islands, Santa Cruz always beckoned to dwellers on the coast, but it was inaccessible to all but friends of the owners and the scientists who came to study its unique geology and ecology. Then in 1987, fearing that at his death the island would fall under the developer's bulldozers, Carey Stanton deeded all that he owned to the Nature Conservancy. At a stroke, the conservancy gained 54,500 acres, by far its largest property and its most complicated task of stewardship.

The conservancy's island manager, David Welborn, picks me up at the landing strip for the three-mile drive to the Main Ranch, where Carey Stanton lived



surrounded by books and American antiques. As we bump along, Welborn notes that the conservancy eradicated more than 30,000 wild sheep, whose grazing promoted erosion. He gestures with disgust at the acres of wild fennel growing along the hillsides and the alluvial flats; it, too, will have to go. But the conservancy stewards are not fanatical. Driving through a grove of eucalyptus, Welborn wonders aloud whether it should be removed. Though the trees are not native, he says, they are welcome on a sparsely vegetated island and they are a part of California history.

He waves across an open field, beyond which are grassy red-brown hills, bare on top but thick with oak groves in the folds and hollows. "Hi, Fred!" he calls to an ancient Hereford steer with four-foot horns. Stanton's Herefords were polled—that is, hornless—but somehow Fred had not got polled. When the conservancy removed most of the cattle, his horns were too broad to let him down the chute onto the boat, so he and about a dozen companions are living out their lives here. And in a way, Fred seems the genius of the place: a creature that you thought did not exist anymore, whose very eccentricity helps him cling to life.

But not even Fred can prepare you for the surprise of the Main Ranch. Rounding a bend, the Jeep emerges onto a flat flanked with a brick warehouse, once a winery, to one side and a French provincial chapel of brick with stone quoins to the other. Beyond is a group of buildings that mix simple California adobe with the square farmhouse style of Provence and a garden awash in Seville and Castille roses with canes thicker than a man's forearm. (A ranch hands' house is now a museum that deals with the indigenous Chumash Indians.) It is strange enough to find a house at all in this wilderness, much less this improbable and beautiful cache of nineteenth-century structures. Stranger still is that the Nature Conservancy—whose members are more familiar with trackless swamps and wooded hillsides—has taken charge, along with the Santa Cruz Island Foundation, of maintaining it.

Shortly after Stanton deeded his property to the conservancy, all the Channel Islands were brought into the National Park system, but with a Byzantine mix of private and public holdings. One consequence is that the rules for visiting Santa Cruz are confusing.

The simplest option is to take one of Island Packers' scheduled day-trips to various locations throughout the island. For a more thorough experience of the nine tenths of the island that once was Stanton's, visitors must apply to the conservancy. According to the conservancy's Debra Terrell, volunteers take the navy's weekly boat to the pier at Prisoner's Harbor on the north side of the island; they sleep in bunkhouses, cook their own food, and help with chores. Those able to part with about \$1,800 for a four-day Wild California program study the island's ecology, botany, and geology with the scientists who know it best. These visitors stay in the ranch's guest rooms, which are furnished with antiques from Stanton's collection. Terrell, a former caterer, cooks meals and packs picnics for excursions to seldom-seen nooks of the rugged shore.

Another alternative is a weekend on the easternmost tenth of the island, with boat transportation through Island Packers and accommodations at Scorpion Ranch through Island Adventures. Unlike the Nature Conservancy, the owners of this area have not sought to erase human depredations. The result is a landscape far less neat but equally dramatic. Rusted remains of 1930s threshers are scattered about Scorpion Ranch. Up on the plateau fields once planted in barley look across to Anacapa Island, where the sun rises. If you look carefully, you can find the derrick of an antique oil rig. But if you walk four miles across this roof of the world to the opposite shore, you suddenly descend into a vale like that of Odysseus's Ithaca.

There, in a small notch above a broad beach, is a grove of olive trees, planted by Justinian Caire one hundred years ago to remind his Genoese wife of her home. I sat down to picnic in the shade of a eucalyptus grove. Hearing a noise behind me, I turned to see a peacock and three turkeys creeping toward my loaf of bread. I have no idea where they came from, but I am sure I did not dream them, any more than I'd dreamed Fred the unpolled Hereford or this hybrid island itself. It was a delight to recognize that, beneath the roar of the waves, the loudest sounds were breaking bread and the rustle of the birds. ▲

*Call for visitors information: The Nature Conservancy, Santa Barbara (805) 962-9111. Island Packers, Ventura (805) 642-1393 or (805) 642-7688. Island Adventures, Ojai (805) 646-2513.*

Until 1987 only the owners, their friends and employees, and the occasional scientist were welcome on the island's rugged coast.

